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ABSTRACT

Results of a small-scale study involving 20 third-grade students indicated that children who watch considerably less television than their peers nevertheless were effectively persuaded by virtue of what and when they watched. Additionally, while these children seemed to understand the functions of advertisments and had experienced prior dissatisfaction with them, they still appeared to be easily overwhelmed by the quantity and quality of holiday advertising campaigns. Teaching children about the persuasive techniques to which they are subjected will continue to be a necessary curriculum thrust. However, due to the recently implemented, overwhelming, and daily barrage of children-oriented marketing, parents and teachers must reach some consensus about the value of permitting children to maintain present viewing patterns. (RH)

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CHILDREN, TELEVISION AND THE HOLIDAY BLITZ

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The topic of children and television has long been of interest to researchers and teachers of the young. Our inquiry was an attempt to begin to identify elements in the children's experiences and emerging knowledge of television advertisements that might better enable us to design appropriate activities for this particular age group. "Holiday Blitz" refers to the period of television advertising in November and December focusing on the promotion of children's toys and games as holiday gifts. Before the Blitz, in early October, we surveyed 30 3rd grade children regarding their gift selections for the Holidays and we also gathered background data pertaining to their viewing habits. In December, each child was interviewed and data related to the children's experiences, understanding, and perceptions of televisions advertisements were gathered. In January, a second personal interview was conducted in which each child was asked to identify any gifts they received which were the focus of television advertisements with which they were familiar. Next, children's satisfaction or disappointment with their gifts, the percieved qualities of the gift relative to the advertisements, and most importantly, children's post-choice perception of television advertisements were gathered.

Sample: The study involved twenty third grade students attending a laboratory school in a college setting. While the school attempts to have a demographic mix representative of its urban setting, family incomes, student motivation, and similar important factors tend to be higher among this group.

The Wish Lists: Children's Pre-holiday Gift Selections

Wish lists were a device used by Rossiter (1974) and others to identify children's gift selections before and during the "blitz" or peak holiday advertising in December. Given the fact that commercials account for a bit more than a fifth of the content of programs watched by children and that over half of the toy industries total number of advertisements are shown in this concentrated period of time, the word blitz appears appropriate to use in describing this situation. In our investigation, the children were asked to generate "wish lists" on three separate occasions: October 3, 1985 -- well in advance of the blitz, and December 2 and December 15, during the height of the advertising campaigns.

Gifts listed by the children during the pre-blitz period included board games, dolls, toys, books, computers, bikes, clothes, money, personal items such as "my own room", entertainment items such as audio tapes and televisions, animals, construction sets, and happiness and candy. The most items listed by one person was 40 and the least was 4. Total number of gifts listed were 273. There were both brand and "generic" names on almost every list. Representative mixes included one girl who asked for <u>any</u> bracelet and a necklace to go with it, a pencil box, a small blackboard with a chalk, a game, a Teddy bear, a Koosa, a girl Cabbage Patch Kid, and a boy Cabbage Patch Kid with a sweat-suit that "has pants and a shirt over it." Similarly, one of the boys asked for books,

model cars, fishing gear, walki-talkies, candy, paste, a G.I. Joe Aircraft Carrier, Robotix, Transformers, Word Yahtzy, Construx, Go-Bot Base, Omega Supreme, Leader 1 and more. However, where Rossiter and others found their children's wish list to be comprised of approximately 50% toys and games, our listings were closer to 70%.

On the second listing, almost two months later, 80% of the children listed fewer items. The highest number was 10 and the lowest was 2. Total number of items listed dropped dramatically to 112. The items tended to be far more specific than the first list, i.e. more brand names, and the new lists tended to include previously unnamed items.

The second listing of the gifts showed the following: stuffed animals and dolls were the first choice of 6 children, musical items for 5 children, toys for 3 children, live animals for 3, building set for 1, and tweezers for 1 child. Overall, stuffed animals dolls of different sorts were listed 19 times, toys were mentioned 12 times, musical items noted 8 times and live animals six. However, animals, books, clothes, and bikes showed up on both boy and girl lists.

The third and final listing took place about two weeks later on December 18. While the total number of items requested by the children dropped from 112 to 99, the lists now tended to be primarily comprised of brand-name products in those cases where it was appropriate, i.e. dolls became a Skipper Doll and transformers became Megatron, Voltron I, etc.

Children continued to select most items along traditional sex role lines with the exception of pets and clothes. Therefore, a comparison of the pre-Blitz and Blitz wish lists indicated these major trends:

1. A dramatic drop in the number of items desired by the children from the first to third listings.
2. A substantial movement away from listing general and/or generic presents to highly specific, brand-name items.
3. A greater percentage of items in succeeding list were along traditional sex role lines.

Children's Viewing Patterns:

Children were asked to keep a log of their television viewing for the entire week of December 8th. A cursory examination of the logs indicated that these children watched substantially less television than that usually reported in studies of most elementary age children. Indeed, on any given school night, less than half of the sample reported watching any television. However, a far more important pattern emerges when one looks at the remaining reported viewing. While only 20% of the children report watching television before coming to school, over 80% watch it when they get home from school. Indeed, the 3:30-5:00 time slot finds these children as involved in viewing as they are during the peak Saturday morning programming traditionally viewed as "Kid Vid" time. Scanning the names of the Saturday morning programs and the

daily 3:30-5:00 offerings, one is immediately aware of the fact of their similarity. Many of the 3:30-5:00 are simply re-runs of the Saturday programs that are now syndicated. Therefore, while our sample viewed perhaps as little as two-thirds of the amount of programming as their peers do, the mix of programming heavily favors that which is targeted for the holiday advertising campaigns. Indeed, with the joining of cable television and the mid-afternoon syndicated market aimed at children, it was now possible for children to be confronted with advertisements for the same holiday gifts on a daily basis. This is in contrast to earlier studies during the Seventies when most children were "marketed" primarily during the Saturday morning hours and during the evening holiday "specials" handled by the major networks.

Children's Perception of Television:

Throughout the investigation, children were questioned about a variety of matters relating to their perceptions of television advertisements. The following points appeared to merit attention:

1. When asked at what age people begin to understand the purposes of television advertisements, sixteen of the twenty children said ages 5, or 7.
2. When asked what are the purposes of advertisements, a wide variety of responses followed. These ranged from "helping us" (reference to a public service advertisement), and "give us a movie break" to "show kids looking cute". However, three-fourths of all

respondents indicated that the purpose of advertisements is to market things.

3. When asked in December to identify their favorite advertisements, children were very specific. The advertisements mentioned most frequently were: Transformers, G.I. Joe, Toys R Us, Cabbage Patch Kids, Nickolodeon, and Downey Fabric Softener. Other less popular favorites were insulations, banks, MTV, Barbie dolls, Bill Cosby Jello, computer, Gobots, Thundercats, Dare-devil Cliff Hanger, bike, physical lab chemistry set, clothes, jewelry, Mr. Wizard, MacDonald's, Benny's, stereo equipment, band aids, Betty Crocker Brownies, dog and cat food, MASK, Lego, Rice Krispies bars, Sorry, Cocoa Puffs, Hide 'N Sleep Tents, and turkey.

   Children were then asked to identify the characteristics of these advertisements that appealed most to them. Four responses accounted for over 80% of the total number. These were "funny", "things I like", item demonstrated, and action.

4. Children were also asked if they had ever asked their parents to buy them something that had been advertised on television, and if so, what was it and was the item like the advertisement? Three-fourths of the children responded that they had done so and all could still identify the item. Of those receiving the items, 6 of 15 stated that the items were not like the

advertisements in at least one way and 3 of these children expressed dissatisfaction with the item.

5. When asked to identify advertisements they disliked, rather than mention specific advertisements they disliked, the children tended to give perceived characteristics of disliked advertisements. Advertisements were disliked if they tried to make you buy things that weren't good; if they were boring, talky, stupid, had bad background music, cut into shows, lied, too short (15 seconds), not really showed what the thing is, or were violent. One child said movie advertisements were too violent, one mentioned commercials about cleaners were boring, one disliked any advertisement about contests, and one disliked everything about advertisements.
6. Finally, when asked if there should be more, less, or the same number of advertisements, 10 responded less, 7 the same, and 3 stated more. (Note: data for items 1-6 were all gathered from December 2 to 18.)

Post-Holiday Data:

Eighteeen of the twenty children reported receiving at least one gift that was the focus of a television advertisement. Additionally, six of twenty children reported giving gifts that had been promoted on television. All but two students reported to be very satisfied with these gifts approximately one month after they were received. When asked

how the items compared to the advertisements portrayal, twelve of twenty children responded positively. Negative comments noted items not included in the gift, greater difficulty of use, and more limited capabilities than portrayed.

Finally, children were asked at the beginning and end of January to state their general feelings about television advertisements. Nine of the students responded favorably, eight unfavorably, and the remaining three students responded both positively and negatively.

Gifts, Advertisements, and Programs:

Of the twenty-four gift items received by the girls and reported to have been the focus of television advertisements, nineteen were dolls and accessories. Of the thirty-six gifts received by boys and reported to have been on television advertisements, fourteeen were robots/transformers, seven were sets used in building things (Lego's, etc.) and ten were general toys and game (balls, cars, board games).

A comparison of the favored advertisements in December to the gifts received by the children indicates that the blitz succeeded. While earlier studies using reasonably sophisticated techniques support this view, recent changes in the industry and its programming are becoming cause for concern. Specifically, it appears that the amount of Kid Vid time for marketing purposes has greatly increased with the surge in the cable industry. Profitability factors as a function of newer technology and syndication makes it possible

to succeed with relatively small receiving audiences. (Break-even points are estimated at 25,000 viewers in some situations.) This, coupled with syndication of Saturday programming for weekday consumption, confronts parents and educators with a situation far more dramatic than that of 10 years ago.

In our extremely limited inquiry, we see children who watch considerably less television than their peers still being effectively marketed by virtue of what and when they watch. Obviously, simply reducing viewing time of children isn't the answer. Additionally, while these children seem to have adequate cognitive defenses in terms of understanding the functions of advertisements and comparable attitudinal defenses in terms of some prior dissatisfaction with advertisements, they still appear to be easily overwhelmed by the quantity and quality of the holiday advertisement campaigns. Also, one key new ingredient in this situation is the relatively recent advent of programming whose star characters are the toys being advertised. Programs now feature films on transformers, Smurfs, Gobots, M.A.S.K., have completely run around the old Federal Communication Commission rules barring "host advertising". Indeed, while during the Fifties Buffalo Bob was eventually told to let others do the selling to the children of that era, today's child has cartoons as both advertisements and main characters in programming.

Obviously, teaching children about the persuasive

techniques to which they are subjected will continue to be a necessary curriculum thrust. However, parents and teachers must reach some consensus about the value of permitting their children to maintain present viewing patterns. Simply put, the "blitz" reported by Rossitor and others during the simpler times of non-cable and afternoon soaps adult programming of the Seventies has been replaced by an overwhelming daily barrage of Kid-Vid marketing. By and large our children reported liking their gifts, the corresponding advertisements, and the programs featuring these items. Is this simply consumer satisfaction or is this the result of an electronic hustle foisted upon a group who really cannot yet define its best interests?